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Mentor's Introduction

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mentor's introduction

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By November of 1992 Lisa had come to know for a year the 12 children who made up STP (Special Talent Program) art in a small Iowa farming community. At the invitation of the school superintendent she initiated an art program for "gifted and talented" middle school children. Lisa many times described the children and related anecdotes of their artmaking.

Andy, Jake and Robyn figured prominently in some of her first writing, three years ago, as she tried simply to understand better her students in order to teach. Like the first marks in a drawing, "gifted and talented" art students were a mystery and a challenge to Lisa, since she discovered that like her efforts at their age art making was essentially a matter of compelled attention, a generative praxis of making and telling.

I, and I suspect most graduate students in our program, were especially interested in the stories Lisa told of individual students when she showed slides and photographs of their work. On one occasion Lisa recalled an instance in sixth grade when she drew for weeks on the cover of a notebook. For a period of time, her school days, she said, "revolved around continued work on my notebook drawing."

Lisa's amplification of that anecdote to a metaphor for being "gifted and talented" over the next two months resulted in an impetus of sorts for composing the history of the STP Art Program. She was emerging from a bout of trying to define gifted and talented; she had been listening to the students artmaking decisions and she wasn't sure how to select students for the next year. The heart of the matter was that class-by-class, shared looking between Lisa and her students in the form of documenting, critiquing art and recording stories gave Lisa (in her talking to students) a chance to look again and to reflect on what it means to be involved, in school, in a long self-sustained art project.

Lisa's dissertation offers many rich stories, conversations and observations about children, who are gifted and talented in various artmaking decisions. In relating her own experiences and responses alongside a faithfully rendered portrait of the STP art program, Lisa follows Coles (1993) insistence to: "write as a witness trying to do justice through narration..." (p. 30). Children making art different ways, for various reasons and for varying degrees of involvement over time, finally, is the subject of Lisa's research as it was her teaching.

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